

VZCZCXYZ0001
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHRH #0397/01 0571015
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 261015Z FEB 07
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4511
INFO RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 8373
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 000397

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT PLEASE PASS TO NEA/ARP FOR SWALKER/BSHUKAN; DRL FOR EBARKS-RUGGLES/RCASTEEL; DRL/IRF FOR KLURIE; ECA FOR TFARRELL/DIVES

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KPAQ](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [KWMN](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: DECEMBER 2006 MEETING OF STRATEGIC DIALOGUE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP

Classified By: Ambassador James C. Oberwetter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1.(C) SUMMARY. The U.S. - Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue Human Development Working Group (HDWG), led by Near East Affairs Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) Scott Carpenter, met December 3-4 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The working group discussed a proposal for the FDR-Abdul Aziz scholarship program, which the Saudis agreed to consider. Saudi participants said the recently completed 6th National Dialogue focused on 1) education; 2) teacher training/certification; 3) educational technology; and 4) school infrastructure/environment. The Dialogue conducted 13 sessions throughout the Kingdom, resulting in recommendations to review educational policy and curricula, modernize, and provide training to teachers -- a project estimated to require two to three years to complete. The SAG is currently revising textbooks to eliminate unacceptable language, building 6,000 new schools, equipping 2,000 with computers and Internet access, and developing "schoolwork/homework" portals.

¶2. (C) U.S. delegates proposed a number of exchange and educational programs, including an interfaith dialogue and legislative and judicial exchanges. Ambassador noted the significant increase of information exchanges as part of the Strategic Dialogue, emphasizing that such exchanges have helped to shape policy decisions. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor DAS Erica Barks-Ruggles noted ongoing discussions with the Federal Judiciary to identify possible exchanges that focus on such areas as court administration. Saudi representatives expressed interest in several of the proposed programs. DOJ Resident Legal Advisor Michael Gunnison emphasized that prosecutors must also be included in such programs, offering to engage with the SAG on such issues as money laundering and counterterrorism finance.

¶3. (C) Saudi delegates complained about delays in obtaining U.S. visas for students and renewing I-20s. DCM noted that the implementation of on-line application and electronic payment systems has helped reduce processing time for visa applications. He noted that fraudulent scholarship letters continue to be a problem, emphasizing that an official, unified list of scholarship participants would help streamline the verification process. END SUMMARY.

¶4. (SBU) The U.S.- Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue Human Development Working Group (HDWG) met December 3-4 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The U.S. delegation, led by NEA DAS Scott Carpenter, comprised the following:

James C. Oberwetter - Ambassador
Michael Gfoeller - Deputy Chief of Mission
Tatiana Gfoeller - Consul General Jeddah
Walter Douglas - Public Affairs Counselor
Erica Barks-Ruggles - DAS, DRL
Thomas Farrell - DAS, Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA)
James Filpi - Attorney-Advisor, International Commercial Law Development Program (CLDP), Department of Commerce
Michael Gunnison - Resident Legal Advisor, Overseas Prosecutorial Development Assistance program (OPDAT), U.S. Department of Justice
Laura Lederer - Senior Advisor to the Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs
Brian Shukan - Senior Saudi Arabia Desk Officer, NEA
Donna Ives - ECA
Kathryn Lurie - International Religious Freedom (IRF), DRL

The Saudi delegation was led by Prince Mohammed bin Saud bin Khalid bin Mohammed Al Saud, Director General of the Information and Studies Center, MFA, and included:

Dr. Abdulmalik Ahmed Al Shaikh - Special Advisor to the Minister of Justice
Dr. Ahmed Mohammed Hamad Al Senany - deputy Minister of Interior for Provincial Affairs
Dr. Ali Saleh Saeed Al Khabti - Assistant Deputy Minister for Research and Educational Studies
Dr. Rayed Krimly - Deputy Director of the Western Department, MFA
Dr. Zaid A.Z. Al Hussain - member of the Majlis al Shoura and Human Rights Commission
Dr. Abdullah Ibrahim a. Al Mojel, Deputy Minister of Higher Education
Abubakr Ahmed A. Baqader - Ministry of Culture and Information
Dr. Abdulwahed Al Humaid - Deputy Minister of Labor for Planning and Development
Dr. Abdallah F. Al Lheean - Ministry of Islamic Affairs
Abdulaziz Al Hadlaq - Director General, International Cooperation, Ministry of Social Affairs
Salman H. Al Shabib - Second Secretary, MFA

Education and Exchanges

15. (C) Following opening statements by Prince Mohammed and Carpenter, the discussion turned to education and exchanges. Farrell emphasized that education and educational exchanges are at the heart of any movement forward. He said the Saudi embassy's cultural and education mission had joined the U.S. - Saudi Study Group to discuss relevant issues, particularly the FDR-Abdul Aziz scholarship program. He noted the unprecedented number of Saudi students currently participating in scholarship programs and discussed other possible areas for exchanges.

16. (C) Farrell recounted that during discussions with the Saudi Educational Mission, they had suggested that the FDR-Abdul Aziz scholarship program was redundant, so more targeted programs needed to be considered. He suggested: 1) pre-collegiate programs such as English-language training with U.S. institutions of higher learning; 2) junior faculty sabbatical programs in the U.S.; and 3) collaborative research for graduate students.

17. (C) Deputy Minister of Education Al Mojel replied that his ministry would look at the proposal before responding. He observed, however, that the current proposal has weaknesses, saying questions about the types of majors, age problems, criteria for selection, and funding must first be resolved. He suggested that a working group be formed to look into this. The U.S. delegation suggested that it might make more sense to rethink the entire program. (NOTE: The Deputy Minister later that evening sent a representative to tell ECA that the Ministry remains committed to the FDR-Abdul Aziz scholarship program and would welcome further discussions.)

END NOTE.)

¶18. (C) Ambassador noted the significant increase of information exchanges as part of the Strategic Dialogue, emphasizing that such exchanges have helped to shape policy decisions. These exchanges are particularly important, he stated, when it comes to discussing those subjects that have typically been difficult to broach in the bilateral relationship, such as religious freedom.

Visa Issues

¶19. (C) Al Mojel said that delays in obtaining U.S. visas and renewing I-20s, particularly in cases where students have changed their course of study, continues to be problematic for Saudis studying in the United States. Additionally, he claimed, students have been detained if they do not meet language or credit-hour requirements, and deported in some cases. He accused some authorities of mistreating students at the ports of entry, and complained that students' inability to obtain social security numbers prevents them from even opening bank accounts in the U.S. MoJ special Advisor Al Shaikh suggested that the problem is not only with students, calling it a "cultural problem." He pointed out that there must be "goodwill" on both sides and responsibility lies with the Saudis, as well as the Americans.

¶10. (C) DCM enumerated several changes that have recently been implemented to help address some of the Saudis' concerns. He noted that Post has processed over 50,000 visa applications this year and has significantly reduced processing time. The implementation of on-line application and electronic payment systems has contributed to the reduced processing time, and the fact that Consulate Dhahran has begun limited via services has also helped. He emphasized, however, that fraudulent scholarship letters continues to be problematic and, despite repeated requests for a unified list of scholarship participants from MoHE -- which would speed up processing by streamlining the verification process -- MoHE has not yet provided this list. Al Mojel stated that MoHE has developed a new scholarship letter to prevent this kind of fraud, but the DCM pointed out that the Consular section

continues to receive fraudulent letters and that a consolidated list is the optimal solution. (NOTE: MoHE has since provided to Post this list. END NOTE.) He also stated that it would be helpful to extend student visas to four or five years duration; however, it must be reciprocal -- the Saudis must be willing to issue visas of similar duration.

¶11. (C) In response to Carpenter's request for an update regarding revisions to curricula and teacher training, Assistant Deputy Minister for Research and Educational Studies Dr. Al Khabti said this was the focus of the recently concluded 6th National Dialogue, which focused on four major areas: 1) education; 2) teacher training/certification; 3) educational technology; and 4) school infrastructure/environment. The Dialogue conducted 13 sessions throughout the Kingdom, which resulted in recommendations to review educational policy and curricula, modernize, and provide training to teachers. He said that the SAG is currently reforming the curriculum to include the skills needed to compete in the global economy. He also noted that textbooks are being revised to eliminate unacceptable language. Additionally, the SAG is building 6,000 new schools, equipping 2,000 with computers and Internet access, and developing "schoolwork/homework" portals.

¶12. (C) Al Khabti emphasized the need for well-trained teachers, noting discussions to change the qualifications for teachers in order to raise the standards. He said the SAG is still trying to pinpoint the problems before attempting to solve them. Committees have been established in all the provinces to review the 572 textbooks that are part of the

educational system. An overall review committee looks at the recommendations of all the committees and liaises between them and the ministry. Al Khabti anticipates that it will take two to three years to rewrite the texts and complete the project.

¶13. (C) The discussion turned to the possible expansion of religious educational programs, and IRF's Kathryn Lurie raised the possibility of an interfaith dialogue. Carpenter noted that approximately 90 religious educators have traveled to the U.S. A constructive next step, he suggested, would be for similar delegations to travel to Saudi Arabia, asking how this proposal could move forward. He emphasized that the most important thing is to get the process started so that the exchanges can take place in both directions.

¶14. (C) MFA's Krimly stated that this proposal has been "referred to the proper authorities" and a response is pending. The Ambassador stated that we are expanding our contacts at the agency-to-agency level and asked the Saudi participants to suggest potential institutional opportunities. He noted that the U.S. has many cultural programs "of every flavor," one of the most successful being the religious exchanges. PAO Walter Douglas noted programs focusing on medical issues such as attention deficit disorder, a jazz band that will perform in Jeddah, and an Arab culture program at the Kennedy Center in Spring 2009 that the president of the Kennedy Center recently traveled to the Kingdom to announce.

¶15. (C) Ministry of Culture and Information's Abubakr Baqader outlined plans for Saudi "cultural days," which will focus on music, theater, and digital photographs. He said there are agreements in place with Senegal, Azerbaijan, and Algeria for cultural exchanges. He also noted the availability of several exhibits for exchange, such as a virtual desert, and said female novelists will be conducting a roundtable in Tunisia.

Judicial and Legislative Exchanges

¶16. (C) Barks-Ruggles discussed during the second plenary session the IFES and National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) proposals, noting that the NCSL proposal complements what has already been agreed upon at the federal level. Prince Mohammed confirmed that the Saudis are in discussion with IFES to work with Saudi municipal councils and the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs (MoMRA), but said the SAG is still studying the proposal. He indicated that MoMRA is interested in the technical aspects of elections. The Majlis Al Shoura, he noted, is an independent

body. "All we can do is advise them," he stated, "what they do is their decision." MoI's Al Senany said that the SAG prefers to operate under a "governmental umbrella," i.e., on a government-to-government basis.

¶17. (C) Barks-Ruggles continued that there are ongoing discussions with the Federal Judiciary to identify possible exchanges focusing on such areas as court administration. James Filpi added that the CLDP program represents a juxtaposition of economic and human development issues, focusing on exchanges of legal experts from the U.S. and around the world. Bringing legal education experts to the U.S., he said, would help to prepare the next generation for the future in a global economy. He noted that Islamic law studies is the fastest growing facet of jurisprudence in the United States, with Islamic finance another growing area.

¶18. (C) Barks-Ruggles suggested academic and personal exchanges, symposia, and internships at identified law firms. MoJ's Al Shaikh agreed to the value of such an approach, noting that MoHE has the lead on such exchanges. Al Mojel stated that a "technical committee" needs to discuss the details, but expressed great interest in the legal studies

component of the proposal. He said the SAG has cooperated with France and the UK on such issues in the past, and would like to add U.S. institutions to the distinguished scholars program list. He indicated that he would like to see an internship program implemented and was supportive of conducting symposia, but reiterated the need to look at the proposal more closely.

¶19. (C) DOJ Regional Legal Advisor Gunnison suggested including prosecutors must also be included in such programs, briefly outlining DOJ's OPDAT program. He offered to engage with the SAG on relevant issues -- particularly money laundering and counterterrorism finance -- noting that he can arrange for other expertise as well. He agreed to follow up on this offer with SAG representatives attending the upcoming Abu Dhabi conference. Al Shaikh pointed out that the SAG would like to be a "model" that shows Shari'a is applicable to a free market economy, emphasizing "we want this to work."

Human Rights

¶20. (C) Turning to human rights, Barks-Ruggles asked whether a database exists for tracking human rights abuses, how cases are adjudicated, and how the U.S. could collaborate with the SAG on domestic violence issues. HRC's Al Hussein stated that the media exaggerates some cases and that, as appropriate, cases are referred to the Government for appropriate action. He claimed that there are no issues with minorities and that they are even represented on the HRC. Al Hussein also said that the Government is dealing harshly with discrimination -- "to let it go means that it would spread rapidly." He advised that, according to Islam, it is the King's duty to educate the people regarding respect for human rights. To that end, he said, the SAG is planning to launch a media campaign to inform the public of its rights and duties.

¶21. (C) Al Senany added that five years ago, MoI established a human rights component, and Hadlaq said the Ministry of Social Affairs also has a Social Consultations Unit that is staffed with experts -- psychologists, social workers, and legal experts. There is also a hotline, he said, and the Ministry recently established a Social Protection Unit.

Breast Cancer Program

¶22. (C) Regarding the Breast Cancer program, Prince Mohammed noted his discussions with NEA Senior Advisor Erin Walsh about the involvement of NGOs, Saudi women, Princess Haifa, and Dr. Suad. He said that these discussions have been informal and that some key ministries were not aware of the proposal. He indicated that a cancer program already exists in Riyadh, and said efforts should be coordinated with that group. Prince Mohammed stated that the Ministry of Health would work with the U.S. on this effort. Carpenter noted that the King Fahd and MD Anderson connections are in place, but more needs to be done regarding the Susan B. Komen Foundation and awareness connection. He emphasized that the

USG looks forward to working with the Saudi Cancer Society and the Ministry of Health. The Deputy Minister of Social Affairs offered assistance to this effort, adding that he and Dr. Suad had agreed that any association must be with a government organization.

Women in Technology (WIT)

¶23. (C) Prince Mohammed said he had spoken with Al-Nahda, which indicated that it is working with Microsoft. Carpenter replied that the WIT program was launched in Jeddah and suggested further discussion about how to address an

important need. He explained that WIT is now geared as a charity program to reach Saudis who could not make it into the Social Affairs Ministry program, asking how best to move the program forward.

¶24. (C) Carpenter and Prince Mohammed closed the meeting by reiterating the critical role the HDWG plays in facilitating discussions on a broad range of key issues. Prince Mohammed emphasized that this liaison function must be institutionalized in order to sustain and build on the progress that has been made.

OBERWETTER